FOVA

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Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research

A coalition of national organizations committed to quality care for America's veterans

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STATEMENT OF

THE FRIENDS OF VA MEDICAL CARE AND HEALTH RESEARCH (FOVA)

ON

THE FISCAL YEAR 2008 APPROPRIATIONS

FOR

THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

BEFORE

THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

February 14, 2007

On behalf of the Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA), thank you for your continued support of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical and Prosthetic Research Program. FOVA is a coalition of over 80 national academic, medical and scientific societies; voluntary health and patient advocacy groups; and veteran service organizations, committed to ensuring high-quality health care for our nation's veterans. The FOVA organizations greatly appreciate this opportunity to submit testimony on the President's proposed $411 million FY 2008 budget for VA research. For FY 2008, FOVA recommends an appropriation of $480 million for VA Medical and Prosthetic Research and an additional $45 million for medical facilities upgrades to be appropriated through the VA Minor Construction account.

FOVA recognizes the significant budgetary pressures this committee bears and thanks both the House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs for your FY 2007 views and estimates with regard to the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program. These recommendations, ranging from at least a $28 million up to a $51.5 million increase over the President's FY 2007 budget request for the VA research program, affirm your ongoing support for our nation's veterans. These recommendations would still provide at least an $11 million to $34.5 million increase over the President's FY 2008 budget. We look forward to working with you to develop views and estimates for FY 2008 that reflect this same commitment to medical research for the benefit of veterans and, ultimately, all Americans.

Medical and Prosthetic Research for Superior Veterans Health Care

Recent stagnate funding has jeopardized VA Research and Development's status as a national leader. Significant growth in the annual Research and Development appropriation is necessary to continue to achieve breakthroughs in health care for its current population and to develop new solutions for its most recent veterans. For FY 2008, the Bush administration has yet again recommended a budget that cuts funding for the VA research program. When biomedical inflation is considered—the Biomedical Research and Development Price Index for FY 2008 is projected at 3.7 percent—the research program will be cut even more significantly than the documented $1 million. Just to keep pace with the previous year's spending, an additional $15 million, for a total of $427 million, is required. FOVA's $480 million recommendation for VA research funding represents an inflation adjustment for the program since 2003; unfortunately, this number does not even consider the additional funding needed to address emerging needs for more research on post traumatic stress disorder, long-term treatment and rehabilitation of veterans with polytraumatic blast injures, and genomic medicine.

The VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program is one of the nation's premier research endeavors. The program has a strong history of success as illustrated by the following examples of VA accomplishments:

- Developed effective therapies for tuberculosis following World War II.
- Invented the implantable cardiac pacemaker, helping many patients prevent potentially life-threatening complications from irregular heartbeats.
- Performed the first successful liver transplants.
- Developed the nicotine patch.

- Developed Functional Electrical Stimulation (FES) systems that allow patients to move paralyzed limbs.
- Found that an implantable insulin pump offers better blood sugar control, weight control and quality of life for adult-onset diabetes than multiple daily injections.
- Identified a gene associated with a major risk for schizophrenia.
- Launched the first treatment trials for Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses, focusing on antibiotics and exercise.
- Began the first clinical trial under the Tri-National Research Initiative to determine the optimal antiretroviral therapy for HIV.
- Launched the largest-ever clinical trial of psychotherapy to treat posttraumatic stress disorder.
- Studied and demonstrated the effectiveness of a new vaccine for shingles, a painful skin and nerve infection that affects older adults.
- Discovered via a 15-year study of 5,000 individuals that secondhand smoke exposure increases the risk of developing glucose intolerance, the precursor to diabetes.

VA strives for improvements in treatments for conditions long prevalent among veterans such as diabetes, spinal cord injury, substance abuse, mental illnesses, heart diseases, infectious diseases, and prostate cancer. VA is equally obliged to develop better responses to the grievous conditions suffered by veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), such as extensive burns, multiple amputations, compression injuries, and mental stress disorders. These returning OIF and OEF veterans have high expectations for returning to their active lifestyles and combat. The seamless mental and physical reintegration of these soldiers is a high priority, but still a difficult challenge that the VA Research program can address.

However, without appropriate funding over FY 2007, VA will be ill-equipped to address the needs of the returning veteran population while also researching treatments for diseases that affect veterans throughout their entire tenure within the VA health care system. Additional increases are also necessary for continued support of new initiatives in neurotraumas, including head and cervical spine injuries; wound and pressure sore care; pre- and post-deployment health issues with a particular focus on post-traumatic stress disorder; and the development of improved prosthetics and strategies for rehabilitation from polytraumatic injuries.

The VA has a distinctive opportunity to recreate its health care system and provide progressive and cutting edge care for veterans through Genomic Medicine. VA is the obvious choice to lead advances in Genomic Medicine as the largest integrated health care system in the world with an advanced and industry-leading Electronic Health Record system and a dedicated population for sustained research, ethical review, and standard processing. Innovations in Genomic Medicine will allow the VA to reduce drug trial failure by identifying genetic disqualifiers and allowing treatment of eligible populations; track genetic susceptibility for disease and develop preventative measures; predict response to medication; and modify drugs and treatment to match an individual's unique genetic structure.

The new VA Genomic Medicine project represents a monumental advancement in the future of the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program and in the future of America's health care system. According to Frances Collins, MD, Director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH)

Human Genome Project, the study of genomics will be most beneficial to the patient population by decoding the genetic mechanisms that cause common, complex diseases—many of which are particularly prevalent in the veteran population—such as hypertension and diabetes.

While advances in genomic medicine show promise in aiding the discovery of new, personalized treatments for diseases prevalent among many veterans seeking treatment at VA hospitals, there is also evidence that genomic medicine will greatly help in the treatment and rehabilitation of returning OIF/OEF veterans. New research has recently targeted the human genome for insight into why certain wounds heal while others do not. Additional studies have considered the differences between genes that aid in healing and genes that cause inflammation and its side-effects. Advancements in this field can drastically influence the treatment of injured soldiers and may play a large role in the long-term treatment of amputees.

The VA Genomic Medicine project will require sustained increases for VA Research funding in the coming years. A VA pilot program involving 20,000 individuals and 30,000 specimens (with the capacity to hold 100,000 specimens) provides estimates that approximately $1,000 will be necessary for each specimen. The potential advances that can be achieved with regard to PTSD and veteran-related diseases point to an expansion of tissue banking activities.

Despite high productivity and success, funding for VA medical and prosthetic research has not kept pace with other federal research programs or with funding for VA medical care. The VA research program has done an extraordinary job leveraging its modest $412 million appropriation into a $1.7 billion research enterprise that hosts multiple Nobel laureates and produces an exceedingly competitive number of scientific papers annually. VA Research awards are currently capped at $125,000, significantly lower than comparable federal research programs. However, VA investigators would be unable to compete for additional funding from other federal sources without the initial awards from the Medical and Prosthetic Research account.

Research Facilities Consistent with Scientific Opportunity

State-of-the-art research requires state-of-the-art technology, equipment, and facilities. Such an environment promotes excellence in teaching and patient care as well as research. It also helps VA recruit and retain the best and brightest clinician scientists. In recent years, funding for the VA medical and prosthetics research program has failed to provide the resources needed to maintain, upgrade, and replace aging research facilities. Many VA facilities have run out of adequate research space, and ventilation, electrical supply, and plumbing appear frequently on lists of needed upgrades along with space reconfiguration. Under the current system, research must compete with other facility needs for basic infrastructure and physical plant improvements which are funded through the minor construction appropriation.

FOVA appreciates the inclusion within the House-passed Military Quality of Life and Veterans' Affairs and Related Agencies FY 2007 appropriations bill of an additional $12 million to address research facility infrastructure deficiencies. The House Committee on Appropriations also gave attention to this problem in the House Report accompanying the FY 2006 appropriations bill (P.L. 109-114), which expresses concern that equipment and facilities to support the research program may be lacking and that some mechanism is necessary to ensure the Department’s

research facilities remain competitive. It noted that more resources may be required to ensure that research facilities are properly maintained to support the Department's research mission. To assess VA's research facility needs, Congress directed VA to conduct a comprehensive review of its research facilities and report to Congress on the deficiencies found, along with suggestions for correction. However, VA cites that this review, already underway for the past year, will take an additional three years to complete.

Meanwhile, in May, 2004, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi approved the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) Commission report that called for implementation of the VA Undersecretary of Health's Draft National CARES Plan for VA research. This plan recommended $87 million to renovate existing research space; however, a complete assessment of research infrastructure needs will likely require a more than $300 million investment.

FOVA believes Congress should establish and appropriate a funding stream specifically for research facilities, using the VA assessment to ensure that amounts provided are sufficient to meet both immediate and long term needs. Congress should also use the VA report as the basis for prioritizing allocation of such funding to ensure that the most urgent needs are addressed first. To ensure that funding is adequate to meet both immediate and long term needs, FOVA recommends an annual appropriation of $45 million in the minor construction budget dedicated to renovating existing research facilities and additional major construction funding sufficient to replace at least one outdated facility per year until the backlog is addressed.

Preserving the Integrity of VA's Intramural, Peer-Review System

As a perquisite for membership, all FOVA organizations agree not to pursue earmarks or designated amounts for specific areas of research in the annual appropriation for the VA Research program. We urge you to take a similar stance in regard to FY 2008 funding for VA research for the following reasons:

- *The VA research program is exclusively intramural.* Only VA employees holding at least a five-eighths salaried appointment are eligible to receive VA research awards originating from the VA R&D appropriation. Compromising this principle by designating funds to institutions or investigators outside of the VA undermines an extremely effective tool for recruiting and retaining the highly qualified clinician-investigators who provide quality care to veterans, focus their research on conditions prevalent in the veteran population, and educate future clinicians to care for veterans.
- *VA has well-established and highly refined policies and procedures for peer review and national management of the entire VA research portfolio.* Peer review of proposals ensures that VA's limited resources support the most meritorious research. Additionally, centralized VA administration provides coordination of VA's national research priorities, aids in moving new discoveries into clinical practice, and instills confidence in overall oversight of VA research, including human subject protections, while preventing costly duplication of effort and infrastructure. Earmarks have the potential to circumvent or undercut the scientific integrity of this process, thereby funding less than meritorious research.

- *A research encompasses a wide range of types of research. Designating amounts for specific areas of research minimizes VA's ability to fund ongoing programs in other areas and forces VA to delay or even cancel plans for new initiatives.* Biomedical research inflation alone, estimated at 3.8% for FY 2005 and at 3.5% for FY 2006, has reduced the purchasing power of the R&D appropriation by $29.7 million over just two years. In the absence of commensurate increases, VA is unable to sustain important research on diabetes, hepatitis C, heart diseases, stroke and substance abuse, or address emerging needs for more research on post traumatic stress disorder and long-term treatment and rehabilitation of polytraumatic blast injures. While Congress certainly should provide direction to assist VA in setting its research priorities, earmarked funding exacerbates ongoing resource allocation shortages.

Again, FOVA appreciates the opportunity to present our views to the Committee. While research challenges facing our nation's veterans are significant, if given the resources, we are confident the expertise and commitment of the physician-scientists working in the VA system will meet the challenge.

Organization Supporting FOVA's FY 2007 Recommendations

Administrators of Internal Medicine
Alliance for Academic Internal Medicine
Alliance for Aging Research
Alzheimer's Association
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
American Academy of Neurology
American Academy of Opthalmology
American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases
American Association of Anatomists
American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy
American Association of Spinal Cord Injury Nurses
American Association of Spinal Cord Injury Psychologists and Social Workers
American College of Chest Physicians
American College of Clinical Pharmacology
American College of Physicians
American College of Rheumatology
American Congress of Rehabilitation Medicine
American Dental Education Association
American Diabetes Association
American Federation for Medical Research
American Gastroenterological Association
American Geriatrics Society
American Heart Association
American Hospital Association
American Lung Association
American Military Retirees Association
American Optometric Association
American Osteopathic Association
American Paraplegia Society
American Physiological Society
American Podiatric Medical Association
American Psychiatric Association
American Psychological Association
American Society for Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics
American Society of Hematology
American Society of Nephrology
American Therapeutic Recreation Association
American Thoracic Society
Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care International
Association of Academic Health Centers
Association of Academic Psychiatrists
Association of American Medical Colleges
Association of Professors of Medicine
Association of Program Directors in Internal Medicine
Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry
Association of Subspecialty Professors
Association of VA Chiefs of Medicine
Blinded Veterans Association
Blue Star Mothers of America
Clerkship Directors in Internal Medicine
Coalition for American Trauma Care
Coalition for Heath Services Research
Digestive Disease National Coalition
Gerontological Society of America
Hepatitis Foundation International
Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International
Legion of Valor of the USA, Inc.
Medical Device Manufacturers Association
Medicine-Pediatrics Program Directors Association
Military Officers Association of America
National Alliance for the Mentally Ill
National Association for the Advancement of Orthotics and Prosthetics
National Association for Uniformed Services
National Association of VA Dermatologists
National Association of Veterans' Research and Education Foundations
National Organization of Rare Disorders
Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs
Paralyzed Veterans of America
Paralyzed Veterans of America Spinal Cord Research Foundation
Parkinsons Action Network
Research!America
Society for Neuroscience
Society for Women's Health Research
Society of General Internal Medicine
The Endocrine Society
United Spinal Association
Vietnam Veterans of America, Inc.
Washington Home Center for Pallative Care Studies